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RAILWAY SANITATION

—AND—

QUARANTINE.

By GEORGE HOMAN, M. D., ✓

Chief Sanitary Officer to the City of St. Louis.

READ BEFORE THE BEAUMONT MEDICAL CLUB, DEC. 18, 1879.

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Railway Sanitation and Quarantine.

BY GEORGE HOMAN, M. D., *Chief Sanitary Officer to the City of St. Louis.*

[Read before the Beaumont Medical Club, Dec. 18th, 1879.]

Gentlemen: Having been honored by receiving an invitation from the president of the club, to present to the members some account of the proceedings had at the seventh annual meeting of the American Public Health Association, held in Nashville, I have thought that it might be not uninteresting to select, out of the many subjects presented and discussed on that occasion, the one of Railway Sanitation and Quarantine and matters connected therewith, for some consideration this evening.

A conference between railway managers and health authorities was held November 19th, at which were present representatives of seven lines of railroad and a large number of medical men and sanitarians.

At this conference, the disastrous effect of yellow fever epidemics on railroad travel, traffic and prosperity, was fully presented, with a statement of the relation of lines of railway to the general public during the existence or operation of national, state or local quarantine measures. The embarrassment, inconvenience and loss inflicted on southern lines of travel during the two past seasons, by the action of individuals and communities, while laboring under the influence of panic-fright, or even well-grounded fear, was something enormous. The actual money loss of one road—the Louisville and Nashville and Great Southern—independent of contingent or constructive losses, was stated by the general manager to have been \$350,000. Each and every community that deemed itself liable to possible

infection adopted such quarantine measures as seemed to suit best its own interest, while the good of the whole was entirely forgotten. Every consideration, save that of selfish interest, was ignored in a blind, unreasoning, and often futile attempt at self-protection. All the hardships and inhumanities attendant on the enforcement of the so-called shot-gun quarantine, were precipitately invoked, often on the strength of a rumor, a groundless apprehension, or a mere suspicion of infection by people whose intelligence and reason seemed at times to be paralyzed by fright. As an illustration of the embarrassment and annoyance to which southern roads were subjected during the epidemic of the past summer, the general manager of the Chicago, St. Louis and New Orleans road, stated that his trains had been compelled to pass through forty-nine quarantines within a distance of 550 miles.

The necessity of devising measures by the adoption of which such serious interference with trade and travel could be avoided, was recognized by all, and it was the feeling of those present, that the right and authority to declare and enforce quarantine should reside solely with some central power, and that in the interests of the general good, local bodies should be deprived of the power to thus needlessly interrupt commerce and travel; and the further necessity was recognized, of said central power modifying and harmonizing all conflicting regulations, as, at present, scarcely any two places have similar sanitary or quarantine codes.

The good health of the people was recognized as meaning prosperity to the roads, and accordingly it was to the interest of railroad managers to do everything in their power to promote the same, and therefore they stood ready to coöperate in all measures tending to that end; but they desired to know if the quarantine system could not be made uniform, and if one quarantine under proper and competent authority would not suffice for all, so that interruptions to commerce from such cause, would be as few as possible, compatible with a due regard for the public health and safety.

A memorial was offered by the railway officials having this general object in view, which contained the following resolutions :

“Resolved, That the representatives of the several railroads, assembled in convention, do most respectfully petition the Congress of the United States, to charge the National Board of Health with the sole power of making and carrying into effect such rules and regulations as to them shall be deemed wise and proper, to govern inter-state commerce affecting the transportation of passengers and merchandise on railroads and on steamboats or other craft plying on lakes and rivers between and through states or territories, where any contagious or infectious disease does or may exist. The memorial further asks that the President of the National Board of Health, the Surgeon-General of the United States and the President of the State Board of Health, or the members of the National Board of Health from the state where such disease exists, should constitute an executive committee with power to act and put in force quarantine rules and regulations for governing the transportation of passengers and merchandise.”

It was further expressed in the memorial, that no clashing between national and state authority should be allowed to prejudice by delays, such great objects as the public health and the material prosperity of the country; that whenever said National Board of Health deems it necessary to put such quarantine regulations into force, it shall designate what class of merchandise (if any) may be transported * * * * and that it shall designate stations or points upon such railways, rivers and lakes, as it shall consider necessary for conducting an effective system of inspection of such passengers or merchandise, and make such provision for caring for sick persons as the interests of the general health and safety shall require.

The memorial concludes with a request that Congress appropriate a suitable sum to carry out the measures indicated, and expresses the belief that such expenditures as are involved in making and executing the same, will not be

objected to by good citizens and tax-payers, and that it will not be a burden seriously felt by the national treasury. After some discussion, the memorial was referred to a committee, to report thereon at a meeting to be held the following day.

The convention re-assembled pursuant to adjournment, and after some discussion, the following resolution was unanimously adopted:

Resolved, That a committee be appointed, to consist of one representative from each State Board of Health, and from each common carrier company represented in this convention, whose duty shall be, by petition or memorial, to bring to the attention of the legislatures of the states, the practical defects of the present system of quarantine, in order that a more effective system may be adopted and enforced by appropriate legislation, and to ask through the various state legislatures an appropriation from Congress for the enforcement of quarantine, to be expended under the approval of the National Board of Health.

It will be observed that there is a material difference between the wording of the memorial and that of the above resolution. After due consideration and discussion, it was deemed best to thus change it, and that aid should be asked of Congress through the representatives of the people in the various state legislatures, rather than by the direct appeal of the members of the convention, as was contemplated in the memorial presented the day before. The former course would prevent any feeling in the public mind, that the railroad corporations were seeking protection or favors of the General government in a manner possibly prejudicial to the public interests; and if this hostile feeling had already been awakened by a misconstruction of motives, the course resolved upon would serve to disarm and allay it, as all the aid sought or desired, would have to be obtained through the efforts of the chosen representatives of the people themselves. A feeling of latent hostility toward railroad corporations seems to exist in some parts of the south, although its expression is less likely to be evoked, when

the promotion of sanitary measures of a practical nature for the benefit of the roads, is proposed, and which is of course more or less directly in the interests of the people themselves. In the course of the discussion the question as to whether or not the enforcement of inland quarantine by national authority would be an infringement of a states rights in sanitary matters was not infrequently touched upon, but almost invariably with expressions by the speakers of the right and duty of a strong central power interfering promptly and efficiently to protect the public health when threatened by an epidemic. This power seems to be fully conferred in the clause of the constitution which says,—“The Congress shall have power to regulate commerce with foreign nations and with the several states.”

The general sentiment was unmistakably in favor of waiving any reserved rights of the states in this respect, and of the exercise of this power by the national government, in the “permanent establishment of a National Board of Health, and its maintenance with all the powers necessary to effect the preservation and promotion of the general public health by quarantine and any and all means that said Board may think necessary.”

The prevalence of yellow fever in the south, during the two past summers, with the attendant railway complications and inconveniences, largely due to the self-assumed sovereign right of every community to declare and enforce quarantine—a quarantine that was too often utterly unreasonable, and in disregard of the claims and sentiments of humanity, not to speak of the rights of common carriers—has forced this matter very closely on the attention of those interested in the lines of railroad which traverse the southern country. Such obstructions to railway transit of course more or less directly affect and derange the business of the entire country; and the possibility of the transportation and spread of the infecting principle of yellow fever, or other epidemic disease, in railroad cars, has suggested the necessity of a sanitary supervision of railroads, and of travel and traffic by railroad, not only in time of epidemics

but regularly and systematically, as an essential part of railway management and equipment, and of the allotted work of duly qualified railway employés.

This subject received attention at a meeting of health authorities at Atlanta, in May last; and a proposition relating thereto was discussed and adopted. It contemplates the thorough and systematic daily inspection, by competent persons, of depots, stations, round-houses, car-shops, grounds, etc., to the end that no lodging place for disease may be maintained in such buildings or on such premises. Another proposition, relating to railroad quarantine, was also adopted, which specifies the distance from an infected place, and the manner in which transfers of passengers and baggage from a train from an infected district should be accomplished. It also suggests the sanitary management and regulation, by competent authority, of sleeping cars and passenger coaches, and the purification, fumigation, etc., of coaches, bedding, upholstery, and similar car furnishings.

The subject of the transportation of freight was also considered, and the sanitary restrictions under which such transportation could be most successfully accomplished, were indicated together with the measures best adapted to secure thorough ventilation of the cars while in transit.

It will be thus seen that the subject of railway quarantine and the sanitary management of railroads is deemed an important one in every respect, and deserving the attentive consideration not only of railroad men but of the general public as well.

The repeated occurrence of yellow fever in the south, has given this subject special prominence in that section of the country, and has suggested the need of railway regulation by an impartial and competent authority. Where inter-State commerce, either north or south, is widely threatened by the prevalence of epidemics, the enforcement of quarantine measures and, consequently, the accomplishment of the greatest good to the greatest number, could be best secured, probably, by the agents of the general government; but the need of the exercise of such authority and power

would be exceptional were the sanitary details of railroad management committed to the care of medical officers, and this service fully identified with the interests of the road on which it was maintained. The establishment of a medical service, ample enough to cover all the details of railroad management where scientific knowledge and skill could avail to prevent sickness or save life, would be an invaluable addition to the working-force of such corporations.

In view of the rapid extension of the railway systems of the south and west, together with the present marked tendency toward consolidation and unification of the interests of different lines of road, the inquiry naturally arises whether the purely business interest of such systems will not render the establishment of a railway medical service a necessity, aside from any advantage that would accrue to the public from such an arrangement. These corporations, with their well-organized systems of management, could administer such a service much more effectually than could be done by either state or national authority.

The creation and maintenance of a medical and sanitary bureau, in connection with their management, on all trunk lines of road, will, in the near future, be recognized as a necessity by their directories, not alone to subserve their own interests, but to enable them to keep pace with the requirements of an enlightened public in this direction; and the establishment of such a service would be a practical solution of the problems discussed at the meetings to which reference has been made.

As immunity from the occurrence of malignant epidemics, even in the north, cannot as yet be guaranteed, the possession of such a service by railroads would afford them an important advantage in meeting promptly such emergencies; and state aid would only be needed, probably, to supplement its workings, instead of having to initiate it; and such a service would come well into play also in the event of the occurrence of animal epidemics on lines of road where the transportation of live stock is an important part of the business.

The sense of the Nashville conference was, that either the state or the general government should provide for, and undertake the work of regulating railroads in this respect; while the result of the deliberations at Atlanta was an expression of belief that such service should be administered by local or municipal authority. The former course, to me, seems unnecessary; while the latter would be impracticable, would be ineffective, and would prove unsatisfactory in its results, both to the railroads and to the public. It is my belief that the wisest course in regard to this matter, would be the middle one, viz.: That the railroad companies themselves assume the work of organizing such a service, and of carrying it into practical effect. If properly administered, it could not fail of affording the most satisfactory results, and the roads would in this way become most effective, though volunteer adjuncts in the development and administration of state medicine.

The attention that has been directed of late to the subject of the relation of railroads to the public during the existence of epidemics, with the discussion and agitation resulting therefrom, has already been productive of good, and progress has been made toward a full solution and understanding of the questions involved therein.

